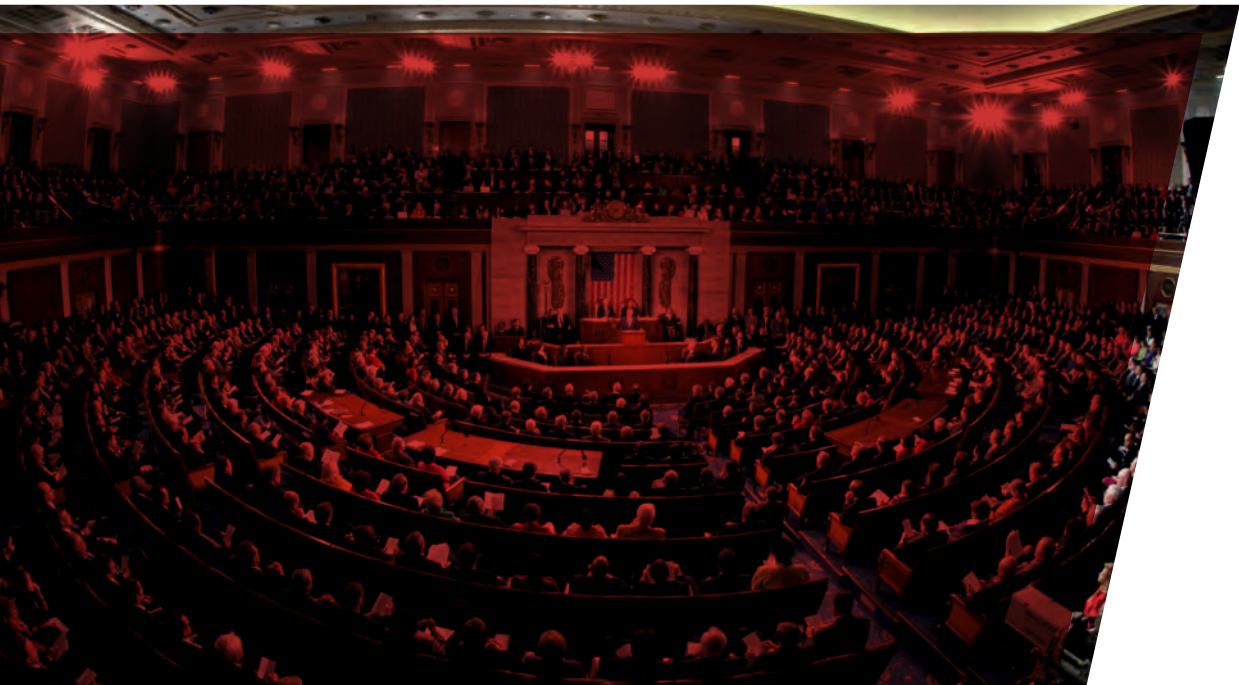


Restoring the Vision:

Overcoming Gridlock to Reassert
Congress's Role in Deliberating
National Security



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In recent years, Congress's role in shaping American national security strategy has diminished due to partisan gridlock from both parties. It's time to reassert our status as a coequal branch of government and do our part to ensure our national security.

One of the early strokes of genius by the architects of the American system was entrusting to Congress the sacred duty of supporting and providing for our military. The founding fathers did so to guard against an all-powerful executive and protect the foundations of individual liberty. However, two centuries of democratic governance, separation of powers, and dedication to the propositions of our founding revealed their true brilliance and foresight.

As America has realized the limitless potential of its ideals, its citizens, and its destiny, the U.S. military has been transformed from a potential threat to liberty to the indispensable guardian of it — at home and around the world. Today, the challenge for Congress is navigating how to fulfill its constitutional duties in accordance with America's global responsibilities.

Through the years, as the country grew into its role as a world power, the obligation of Congress to ensure America lived up to the hopes and dreams of the founders only became more important. The post-World War II global order relies fundamentally on American leadership. The role of Congress, therefore, is not only to serve as the legislature of our great nation, but also — as a co-equal branch of government for the most powerful country in the world — to help maintain the stability and prosperity of the liberal order. We cannot take this charge seriously enough.

That is why the diminished role of Congress in deliberating and debating the strategy to address the global challenges and opportunities we face is one of the great tragedies of our modern political system.

Congress has a fairly straightforward set of constitutional roles and responsibilities: raising and supporting armies; providing and maintaining a Navy; providing advice and consent on treaties and nominations; controlling the purse strings; conducting oversight of executive branch departments and agencies; and exercising checks and balances as a co-equal branch of government.

Yet, Congress has a more fundamental role in shaping American national security strategy than conventional constitutional wisdom would dictate. Unfortunately, we have allowed these important duties to wither away.

The legislature, and in particular the Senate, is intended to be a deliberative body — one that is capable of providing a thoughtful, reasoned, and measured approach to matters of national import. In the national security sphere, the benefits of this deliberative approach are clear. Where the executive branch is consumed with the urgency of day-to-day events, the legislature can take time for precious debate and careful consideration of both current problems and future potentialities. Free from the paralysis of dealing with crisis management, Congress should be able to provide the strategic thinking that national security demands.

Practically speaking, the process for Congress's role starts with a sober assessment of national security threats. It then proceeds with spirited debate about the requirements necessary to meet those threats, followed by the authorization of policies and appropriation of resources to support those requirements. Finally, it provides vigorous oversight of those policies and resources. At its best, this is how Congress can — and has — functioned.

In recent years, however, Congress has become only a shadow of the deliberative body it was intended to be. Political polarization has led to partisan gridlock. No matter which party is in power, the majority seems intent on imposing its will, while the minority seems solely interested in preventing any accomplishments. As we lurch from one self-created crisis to another, we are proving incapable of not only addressing the country's most difficult problems but also fulfilling our most basic legislative duties. "Compromise" has become a dirty word and working across the aisle a political liability. But these very principles were meant to define our legislative process.

Over time, regular order — the set of processes, rules, customs, and protocols by which Congress is supposed to govern itself and do business on behalf of the American people — has totally broken down. This has led to a paralysis that has rendered the institution largely incapable of exercising its unique responsibility to thoughtfully consider broader strategic questions. In doing so, Congress has diminished its role and, ultimately, disempowered itself.

This has wrought havoc, most crucially, on our

country's national security policies. Nowhere is this more apparent than our defense budget. For years, U.S. military spending has been senselessly constrained by sequestration — perhaps the single greatest legislative failure that I have seen. Never intended to become law at all, sequestration was meant to be a threat so grave that it would force bipartisan agreement to reduce the deficit. But bipartisanship proved too difficult for Congress, and the result was that arbitrary spending caps and sequestration became the law of the land.

There is broad agreement on both sides of the aisle that defense has been woefully underfunded since the spending caps and sequestration came into effect. Even still, Congress has not been able to muster the political will to find a permanent solution to the problem. Instead, we have fallen into the habit of funding our government through short-term budget deals that we all know have a harmful

on the floor of the Senate — undercutting one of its central purposes. While in the end a large majority of senators from both parties vote for the legislation each year, it is disappointing that we can no longer find a way to openly debate matters of such consequence to our military and our national security.

It is essential that we find a way to restore Congress's unique role in providing the deliberative, strategic approach that is so needed in our national security decision-making — especially in today's increasingly dangerous and unstable world. To do so, we should look to our own past. At several key moments in recent history, Congress has demonstrated the courage and moral fortitude to do the hard work of thoughtful deliberation and strategic thinking to enact visionary reforms, policy changes, or shifts in national security strategy.

There are a few episodes that stand out

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during my time in Washington. The first demonstrates the ability of a small group of members of Congress with strong personal convictions to change the trajectory of national security — despite determined opposition from a president. In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter was considering withdrawing all U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula in an effort to negotiate with the Chinese and the Soviets to prevent

another war. As a Navy liaison in the Senate at the time, I escorted a bipartisan delegation of senators, including Henry “Scoop” Jackson and William Cohen, on a visit to South Korea. That on-the-ground experience led these leaders to conclude that troop withdrawal would aggravate rather than alleviate the security situation.

Upon our return to Washington, the senators went to the White House and worked hard to convince the president that a troop withdrawal would not be the right course of action. These senators were highly regarded for their national security experience and expertise. While one of them might not have made a difference, the bipartisan group was able to change his mind and, in doing so, change the course of history. The results of withdrawing troops from South Korea would have been disastrous for our interests and those of our allies in the region.

I am proud to say that the Senate Armed Services Committee has long been one of the rare exceptions to the breakdown of regular order. For more than 50 consecutive years, Congress has enacted the National Defense Authorization Act in a bipartisan manner, and presidents of both parties have signed those bills into law.

Unfortunately, even the bipartisanship surrounding the defense authorization bill has proven fragile. In recent years, we have struggled to reach agreement on a process to debate and vote on amendments under an open process

The second episode demonstrates the value

of careful study, oversight, and reform — even when faced with bureaucratic opposition from the executive branch. The Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act was the most consequential reform of the Department of Defense since its creation. Passed in 1986, my last year in the House of Representatives before I came to the Senate, this legislation was the result of years of hard work by the Armed Services Committee.

Goldwater-Nichols came about in response to a series of military failures — the Vietnam War, the failed hostage rescue in Iran, and difficulties during the invasion of Grenada. After years of meticulous deliberation and study, the committee identified the root causes of these failures and enacted sweeping organizational reforms to fix the problems, increase efficiency, reduce waste, and encourage a more unified force. On the whole, those reforms have served our country well.

The third episode demonstrates the power of shifting the paradigm during a crisis — in the face of strong path dependency from the administration. In 2006, the situation in Iraq was rapidly spiraling out of control. Those dark days saw slow progress, rising casualties, and dwindling public support for the war. The Bush administration continued to pursue the same strategy in the face of mounting evidence of its catastrophic failure. In Congress, we knew a new approach was urgently needed to turn the tide. As the representatives of the people, we understood that a mood of defeatism was rising, as critics who would have preferred failure called for unconditional troop withdrawal.

Together with a group of highly-regarded national security experts, Congress demanded a change in strategy. The intellectual contributions of thought leaders were central to crafting the troop surge strategy, and Congress played an important role in building public support — in part through high-profile hearings like the one that allowed Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker to make the case against accepting defeat. In 2007, President George W. Bush finally changed course and adopted a strategy that could lead to victory, working tirelessly to earn public support for the surge. While the gains made after the surge have since been squandered, we should not underestimate how the change in strategy turned the tide.

It is time to get back to this way of doing business. To be sure, Congress is not perfect — least of all, its members. We have all made our fair share of mistakes and have gotten the details wrong on more than one occasion.

Even so, we owe it to those who put our system in place to become the deliberative body we were intended to be. When it comes to asserting our role

in national security, we owe it also to the men and women serving in our armed forces who put their lives at risk every day to keep our nation free.

By reinvigorating the processes, rules, protocols, and customs of Congress, we can get back to fulfilling our unique role in national security decision-making. Through deliberation, debate, and regular order, we can overcome our current polarized, paralyzed moment — just as the founding fathers intended us to. By doing so, we can reassert our status as a coequal branch of government and do our part to ensure our national security. Only then can we — imperfectly — help our country move forward, secure our interests, defend our values, and protect the world order that has brought peace and prosperity to so many. 🇺🇸

John McCain graduated from the Naval Academy in 1958. He served in the U.S. Navy until 1981. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Arizona in 1982 and elected to the U.S. Senate in 1986. McCain was the Republican Party's nominee for president in the 2008 election. He currently serves as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services.